

-----  
'No one understood'  
-----

Laura Neuman's case was proof of many things: the trauma of rape, the destructive power of denial and the inscrutability of the past. But her life stands as testimony to so much more.

By Allison Klein  
Sun Staff

January 5, 2003

The faded sheet of pink paper is unremarkable in almost every way. A Mercy Hospital discharge form, it bears few defining marks other than her name, Laura Ann Neuman, the date, Oct. 14, 1983, and the time, 4:55 a.m. Nowhere does it use the word "rape."

Its most distinguishing characteristic is the value Laura Neuman has placed on it for almost two decades, holding onto it fiercely, not because of what it said or didn't say, but because of what it represented: It was her only proof that a stranger had crawled through a window in her apartment when she was 18, placed a pillow over her face, and raped her in her own bed.

The morning Laura was examined at Mercy Hospital and discharged, she folded the pink paper three times so it would fit into her pocket and brought it with her to a friend's house, where she took a long shower and slept restlessly for a few hours. Her mother showed up and insisted she come home, but didn't want to talk about the rape. She doubted the truth of Laura's story.

At the Police Department, where Laura went to ask whether a suspect had been found, she met a similar reaction. None of the officers spoke of the evidence in her case: the semen recovered from her at the hospital, the fingerprints lifted from a bedroom window. It was as though it had never happened.

As the years passed, the trauma of the rape did not. Laura moved a dozen times: from small apartments in Baltimore where she lived while attending community college, to midsize homes in Washington while she climbed the corporate ladder, to the picturesque four-bedroom house she bought in Annapolis. Always, she carried with her the folded pink paper, secure in a fire-retardant lockbox she stored underneath a bed.

"It was my link, my connection to the past, and I didn't want to let go of it," says Laura, now 37. "I was afraid if I lost it, I couldn't prove it happened."

Laura's family did not believe a stranger had raped her. The police never reported progress; never even seemed to be looking for a suspect. When, time after time, Laura called to press them about her unsolved case, she would take out her hospital discharge paper and examine it. Had something been overlooked, some clue that might lead to her assailant?

For 19 years, Laura Neuman never doubted that the man who raped her could be found. But she could not have known how long it would take, how many times the police would brush her off, how many sleepless nights she would endure.

Sometimes, the pink sheet of paper remained in its box for years undisturbed, its testimony to Laura's past silenced. But every day bore the painful evidence of her experience.

Each night without fail, Laura would check her house, timidly creeping from room to room, flicking on lights and peering into closets and corners. On occasion, she brought with her the butcher knife she kept under her pillow.

In those moments, Laura was no longer the tough-minded executive who had built a prosperous life. She was a terrified teen-ager, lying on her bed in the navy blue-and-white striped nightgown her mother had given her for Christmas.

Laura Neuman is a trim woman with deep blue eyes, a self-made executive who began running technology companies about three years ago. Confident and well-spoken, she is known for her aggressiveness and tenacity.

But in the company of a trusted few, another Laura emerges. She can be timid and anxious, insecure and fearful. Her brother Stuart, who at 36 is a year younger than his sister, knows this side of Laura. At her insistence, he lives with her. She refuses to live alone.

"I have an escape plan for every part of the house," she says. "I play scenarios over and over again in my mind. I keep my phone and my mobile phone next to my bed so I can call the police and my brother at the same time."

Laura relies on a network of friends, such as Richard Durkee, to help her feel safe. Richard met Laura four years ago when they were working together at an Internet company. He noticed that if they traveled for work, Laura would not sleep on the first floor of a hotel, particularly if it had a balcony. If he drove her home, she sometimes asked him to come in and "check the house."

"I would start in the basement and look into every location where someone could be lurking," Richard says.

Laura's fears extended beyond her house. She told a girlfriend she couldn't go camping; she could not even venture into her leafy back yard alone at night to use her pool or hot tub.

"It's really a fear of the dark, a fear of the night," she says. "I have an image that's etched into my mind, and it's a question of whether or not I can block it."

The rape that restricted her sense of freedom at her home in Annapolis also ended her first try at independence from her family. She had quit high school early, passed a test to earn her equivalency degree and, at 18, left the Neumans' small, three-bedroom house in North Baltimore to strike out on her own.

Laura's decision upset her parents. John and Diane Neuman didn't have much, but they'd worked to improve their lot, moving from a rowhouse in East Baltimore when Laura was 10 to escape a neighborhood where their daughter was often robbed on her way to school. John Neuman was a draftsman who didn't always have a steady job. Diane raised five children, including Laura's mentally retarded sister. The couple taught their kids to appreciate what they had. But Laura wanted more from her own life.

The enterprising girl who'd worked a paper route and operated a lemonade stand to earn cash became a teen-ager who set her sights on a college degree. She enrolled at Essex Community College and took a full-time job as a waitress to pay her tuition.

But just two weeks after moving into her apartment in North Baltimore, Laura's plan unraveled.

On Oct. 13, 1983, Laura drove home from her waitress job in tears. Because of a new liquor law that briefly went into effect, she was too young to serve alcohol, and her boss told her she could no longer work there. She worried how she would pay her part of the rent, or her college tuition.

In her ground-floor apartment at Walker Manor, a complex in Cedarcroft near the Baltimore County line, Laura slipped on her nightgown and climbed into bed. She set her eyeglasses on her nose, flipped on the television and soon fell asleep, oblivious to the fact that someone was watching through a window.

Nearly two hours later, a tall man slid through an open window in her roommate's empty bedroom, made his way to Laura's room and awakened her.

Still groggy, Laura heard the TV click off and felt her glasses being tugged from her nose. Before she could open her eyes, the man put a pillow over her face and held a gun to her right temple. He ordered her not to scream.

"How old are you?" he demanded.

"Eighteen." Laura trembled beneath the pillow.

The man then shoved a washcloth in her mouth and turned her on her side. She knew what was about to happen.

Her mind flashed back to a high school teacher talking to her class about rape. Don't fight back, the teacher said, just try to come out of it alive.

She felt the man lift her nightgown to her neck, his saliva on her breasts. Then she heard his pants drop. Laura didn't struggle as the man raped her.

Minutes later, when he was finished, she heard him leave through the front door. She lay in bed for a while, unable to move. When she heard a noise, she thought the man was returning to kill her. She looked up to see her roommate in the bathroom. He had just arrived home.

When two detectives from the Northern District arrived at the Woodson Road apartment, they found Laura crying uncontrollably. They asked a few questions, then left her sitting at her dining room table for about an hour while they spoke with her roommate.

Something about the officers' demeanor bothered Laura from the start. Their questions felt like an interrogation. They asked her the same things over and over. It seemed as though they were trying to catch her in a lie. Laura did not know why they were so doubtful, or how to combat their skepticism.

Eventually, the officers removed her bedsheets and mattress pad as evidence. A crime scene crew dusted for fingerprints. An officer drove Laura to Mercy Hospital, and her girlfriend Kathy met her at the emergency room. There, a doctor examined her and took semen samples from her body and underwear.

When she left the hospital at about 5 a.m., she received a pink copy of the hospital's discharge form. On the back, an officer scribbled his name and a case number.

A hospital form, fingerprints, a semen sample.

For a long time, no amount of evidence would be proof enough.

Maybe Diane Neuman simply could not face what had happened to her daughter. Maybe her suspicions arose from the tumult of a strained mother-daughter relationship. Or maybe guilt bred denial.

At first, Diane Neuman seemed to think that her daughter had had sex with a friend and was trying to cover up a pregnancy. She blames police for her doubts.

"There was something fishy about the way they investigated," Diane says. "If the police had been the least bit proactive in the beginning, it would have saved our family an enormous amount of heartache. A police officer was the one who told me she did not believe Laura. She thought it was somebody Laura knew. Like what they refer to today as a date rape. Because of that, we never knew quite what to make of the whole thing."

Diane Neuman says it was clear that the police were not looking for suspects, and she may be right. The last two handwritten words on Laura's police report are "solvability poor."

"If you can't move the brick wall, you have to deal with it on the terms you can," Diane says. "I'm a practical person. We focused on the fact that Laura has been hurt. Your immediate reaction is something terrible happened to your child. She was not happy that was the approach we took."

Diane says she and her husband, who is no longer living, had many conversations over the years about what happened to Laura. Sometimes, they spoke of guilt. "Her father and I always felt so bad because we felt if she'd never moved, this would have never happened."

She admits that thinking Laura knew her assailant was easier than believing the truth. "At least if it was somebody Laura knew, and it was a situation that got out of hand - that would have been not quite as bad as some monster who came in and held a gun to her head. "It has been an extremely frustrating, heart-wrenching experience. It has consumed Laura's complete adult life, the adult lives of our other children, and one-third of my life. I don't know how other families react to crime, but I do know this: It has cast a long, deep, dark shadow over this family that never faded."

Laura's brother and housemate, Stuart Neuman, tries not to get caught in the push and pull between Laura and their mother. But he acknowledges the pain the rape caused Laura.

"It's not that it has ruined her life," he says. "The issue is about unnecessary suffering and diminishing someone's life."

Until just a few years ago, he says, he never asked Laura what happened that night. It was a subject he felt uncomfortable broaching. He wonders if the times didn't shape the family's response, or lack of response. Society, he says, including the Neuman family, was not equipped to deal with the trauma that a rape victim experiences.

"Laura feels she was really let down and got no support," Stuart says. "By and large, it's true."

A police report dated Nov. 13, 1983, a month after the rape, hints at the degree to which Laura's assault swamped the family. The report says: "Ms. Neuman stated that this case has caused her a lot of trouble with her mother and brothers and sisters as they do not believe her that the offense happened. She wishes to drop the investigation due to the fact that she could not identify the suspect and she has moved home and wishes the matter to end. She feels that as long as there is an investigation her home life will be hard. I wish this case suspended by request of victim."

Laura is adamant that she never made that request and only recently learned of the report. "I take offense to the idea that I would have wanted it closed," she says.

Even so, at her parents' house, Laura's efforts to talk about the rape were eventually silenced by hostility and disbelief.

"Everyone around me acted like it didn't happen. There was no comfort, no acknowledgment that it wasn't my fault. No one understood."

Laura's photo albums are stuffed with smiling snapshots, family pictures and prom portraits. But they contain no record of her between the ages of 18 and 22.

"Here I am at 23," she says, pointing to a picture of her and a girlfriend. "This is when I started living a normal life again, taking trips, going out with friends."

Laura doesn't remember much about those first years after the rape. "I was living in this gray place."

Eventually, she moved out of her parents' house. She gave up on a going-nowhere career in retailing after seeing an ad in the paper for an investor representative's job at T. Rowe Price. She hadn't graduated from college, but convinced the company to hire her anyway. She told them she would continue work on her bachelor's degree.

She attended Catonsville Community College and the College of Notre Dame in Baltimore. But she immersed herself so much in work, often juggling three jobs at a time, that she still did not graduate. Switching jobs and companies several times, she began moving up professionally.

At 30, she was accepted into a master's program in business at Loyola College, an extremely unusual step for someone without a bachelor's degree. She earned her graduate degree, then completed the Executive Program at the prestigious Stanford Business School. Her specialties range from building companies to strategic planning and raising venture capital.

With success came a good income, and Laura amassed many material things, buying a forest-green Mercedes and a beautiful home with a swimming pool, and furnishing her house as if it were going to be featured in House & Garden magazine.

Her personal relationships, though, were less than satisfying. She could not get as close as she wanted with boyfriends, friends or work associates. So in 1995, Laura began to see a therapist in Severna Park.

Fern Beu remembers her first impressions of Laura: She had a "hard, protective shell" and saw things as black or white - "who's for you and who's against you. She had a very, very, very strong code of ethics." In life and work, Laura's tenacity has been her hallmark, but her intensity could be off-putting initially. "What I know about Laura is that she pulled herself up by her bootstraps," Beu says. "It was her triumph and her defense."

At Laura's request, the therapist met with her mother and brothers and determined that, as a daughter, Laura "was no walk in the park, but not a juvenile delinquent by any means." She says there was not a lot of tenderness in the Neuman home - and the family clearly denied that Laura was raped.

That left Laura with a simmering anger - toward her family for not believing her and at Baltimore police for not helping her.

She was able to channel most of that anger into her professional life, giving her a drive that came to define her in the workplace. But she did not have peace.

Last January, on a Friday at 10 p.m., Laura snuggled into bed to watch 20/20. She had no idea what the TV newsmagazine would feature that night, and was surprised to suddenly see the face of Baltimore's police commissioner on the screen.

Edward Norris was talking about old, unsolved rape cases.

Thousands of rape kits containing semen, he said, are sitting in evidence-control refrigerators. The city doesn't have the money to get the DNA in the semen analyzed, he said, and yet that step could solve these cases, some of them decades old.

Under the covers, Laura's body stiffened. Her mind raced. She knew there was DNA in her case because they recovered semen from her at the hospital. Was it just sitting in a refrigerator in downtown Baltimore, waiting to be analyzed?

On the television, reporter Brian Ross explained that 20/20 had agreed to pay for half the cost of processing the DNA evidence from 50 unsolved cases. The kits had been sent to a laboratory and the semen had been analyzed. The

DNA results were then entered into a database containing the DNA codes of criminals who had supplied samples, either by court order or after being convicted of crimes such as rape. Ross revealed that in four of the cases, there were DNA matches in the database. Four suspects were identified, including one man who had raped and killed a 20-year-old woman 12 years before.

It was as if the television were speaking directly to Laura. "I thought, 'I have to do this now. This is it.' "

The next morning, she pulled out her folded pink paper and began a telephone campaign. She called the Northern and Central District police stations and several lawyers. On the other end of the line, she heard what seemed like an endless stream of empty promises and buck-passing: "We'll call you back." "That's not handled out of this office." No one offered a referral, and no one called back.

While such brush-offs had robbed Laura of hope in the past, now they steeled her resolve: Old rape cases were being solved, and there was no reason hers couldn't be one of them.

It took dozens of calls and two months before she got a break: Try a detective named Bernard Holthaus, someone told her; he might be able to help.

She held her breath and dialed the number for the Baltimore sex offense unit, only to learn that Holthaus was away. He'd be back in two weeks.

Laura would leave nothing to chance. Every day for two weeks she called asking for Holthaus. On April 8, he came to the phone.

Just a few weeks earlier, the detective had begun the Baltimore Police Department's first effort to re-examine old, unsolved rape cases. As the only full-time member of the sex crimes "cold case" squad, Holthaus was juggling too many files already. He didn't have time to take on one more, but something in Laura's voice stopped him.

She timidly told the detective that she had been raped nearly two decades ago and wanted her case reopened. She mentioned the 20/20 segment.

He listened, then asked: "What were you wearing that night?" "A long, navy blue nightgown with thin white stripes and an applique on the front that was red and green," she answered, surprised at both the question and her quick reply.

In a matter-of-fact tone, the detective continued to probe Laura's memory for details. No one had ever asked her these questions. She answered them precisely, unable to gauge his response.

After about 20 minutes, Holthaus asked Laura something she didn't expect: He wanted to know how the assault had affected her life. "Every night I'll wake up at about 4 a.m. and go through my house and check the doors and windows," she told him. "I could never have close personal relationships. I've never had children, never been married. The incident has given me the courage to put a lot into my professional life."

On the other end of the phone, the detective was quiet. "A cold chill went up my spine," he recalls. He knew he had a priority case.

Bernie Holthaus and Chester Norton were assigned to the new sex crimes cold case unit because of their expertise - at 35 and 36, they each have about 16 years with the department - and because of their compassion for victims.

"The 11th commandment is thou shall not get away with it," Norton says. "Me and Bernie take everything on a personal level."

When Holthaus spoke to Laura, Norton was working part-time in the two-person squad. Holthaus, who is 6 feet 6, and Norton, who is 6-2, are burly yet gentle giants. Something about Laura Neuman's case seized their interest.

First, the detectives had to "regenerate" Laura's case, meaning they had to locate her original police report and any evidence gathered at the time. The two were determined to work quickly. They sweet-talked the employees in central records into searching for Laura's file by hand. Holthaus told one of the workers the facts of Laura's case, and pleaded with her to make it a priority.

"You can't just say, 'Can you check this?' because you might get it next week or next month," Holthaus says.

One of the first things the detectives learned was that the number scribbled on the back of Laura's hospital discharge sheet, 5K26493, was in fact a police complaint number - but it wasn't the one for her case. The correct case number was 5J29903. How many times had Laura called different districts over the years with the wrong case number? The officers didn't even want to think about that.

Their next move was to get someone to find her police report on microfilm. That would take two days. In the meantime, they searched for Laura's rape kit, which would contain the semen they would need for DNA analysis. After several days of looking, they hit their first significant roadblock: There was no rape kit. It had been lost or destroyed, along with Laura's nightgown.

"It was quite a sinking feeling. There was a big 'Oh, no,' " Holthaus recalls. "After that, the case became a desperate scratch."

On April 11, though, the detectives received a copy of the police report on Laura's case and discovered that another piece of evidence had been collected the night of Laura's rape: fingerprints.

The chance of using newfangled DNA technology to solve the case had been dashed, and their hopes now hung on the result of old-fashioned police work - but only if the fingerprints also hadn't been lost or destroyed. Once again, the detectives related the details of Laura's case to workers. And this time, they caught a major break: Two preserved fingerprints were quickly located in the file.

The latent left index and thumbprint, taken from a window in Laura's apartment the night of the crime, were entered into the Maryland Automated Fingerprint Identification System. Known as MAFIS, the computerized repository had been available for use in Baltimore since 1992. It contains tens of thousands of fingerprints collected from suspects when they're arrested.

Within 30 minutes, they had a match.

Laura had been waiting for Holthaus to call her back for three days. It felt like weeks. She called him several times and left messages.

When he did call back, on April 11, he told her he was looking for evidence. Being cautious, he did not tell her how far he had gotten already. Laura made an appointment to see him the following day. But after she hung up, she realized she couldn't wait any longer. She called back and said she was coming by. She jumped in her car, but not before grabbing her pink hospital discharge sheet.

At the Baltimore police station, she met Holthaus for the first time. The detective took her into an interrogation room, and Laura showed him the old hospital record. He asked to keep it in his file, but she wouldn't let go of it.

Next, Holthaus told her of his progress: He had located her police report, but could not find any evidence from which they could make a DNA identification. The good news, he said, was there were latent fingerprints left at the scene of the crime. But before telling Laura he had matched the prints with those of a suspect, he asked her two sensitive questions, trying to rule out any other possible explanation for the prints:

Did she have any black people visit her during those two weeks after she moved into her Cedarcroft apartment? Did her roommate have any black people visit while they lived there?

When the answer to both questions was no, Holthaus told her the rest. The fingerprints in her file had a match: Alphonso Hill, a 50-year-old black man who stands 5-11 and weighs 175 pounds. Holthaus would try to pick him up the

following week. For now, he said, he needed to snap a few Polaroids of Laura for his investigation.

On the drive back to Annapolis, Laura was in a fog. For the first time in nearly 20 years, she began to think of her attacker, rather than the attack. A human being was attached to the event, a person who could corroborate her story and possibly even explain why it had happened.

"I went from, 'Why did this happen to me?' to 'Why did this person do this to me?'"

For the next several days, the detectives investigated their own set of questions about Alphonso Hill.

He had graduated from Edmondson High School and done a brief stint in the military. Between 1975 and 1983, he had been arrested and convicted four times for crimes such as trespassing, assault, and a minor, fourth-degree sex offense, which his police record does not describe in any detail. Between 1983 and 2000, he had been convicted five more times for drug crimes and burglary. He had been in and out of jail - most notably out in October 1983, when Laura was raped.

The detectives learned Hill was now a student at Coppin State College and living with a girlfriend in Baltimore. Two years before, it appeared, he had begun to straighten out his life, getting clean while becoming a full-time student. He was majoring in psychology.

Holthaus called Laura: "We tracked him down, we know where he is. We're going to pick him up tomorrow."

That night, Laura, who was raised Catholic and now describes herself as spiritual, lay in her bed and asked for divine help.

"I said, 'please, please, please, please, God make this happen.' I guess you could call it praying. I was so thankful for the life I have, but it was like, I know I have a wonderful life, let me have this, too."

Then she made a pact.

"I said if you let me have this, I will find a way to have an impact on other people and help other people. I've never wanted something so badly in my life."

On Tuesday, April 16, detectives found Alphonso Hill at Coppin State College. Though they didn't say why they were picking him up, he willingly went with them to police headquarters. They bought him a soft drink and sat him down in a tiny

interview room with a blue door, white concrete walls and a one-way mirror. Then they placed four snapshots of Laura on a table in front of him.

"Who's that?" Hill asked, picking up the pictures and squinting closely at her face.

"Let me tell you a story," Holthaus replied. "This is a lady, who every night at 4 a.m., gets up and checks her locks and windows. She's never been married, never had children."

Holthaus remembers seeing an expression of disbelief come over Hill's face as the story unfolded. "He looked embarrassed. His shoulders hunched, his body visibly shrunk." Then, he confessed.

In a taped statement, Hill said that he was depressed the night of the rape. He said he was free-basing cocaine and on a "peeping spree."

"Meaning, just go up and peep until I find and see something stimulating until I will jack off on it and go home," he told detectives.

But when he happened upon Laura, he made his way inside.

"I just raised the screen and went through the window," he said. "I realized it was a female and I woke her up by, you know, turned her over and woke her up, and, whatever, put my hand over her mouth. She was, uh, obviously just afraid because you know, she, she didn't, uh, resist or anything."

He said he asked the woman how old she was, commenting that she looked like "she was too young."

Hill admitted he raped Laura. But he made a point to say he hadn't hurt her.

Five and a half months passed between Hill's arrest and the day he was scheduled to stand trial in Baltimore Circuit Court. On Sept. 30, at 10:25 a.m., Laura stood in a courtroom and stared at the stranger whose actions had haunted her life for almost two decades.

Detectives Holthaus and Norton were there, too, prepared to testify and to offer support for Laura. They understood the burden Laura would bear. Says Holthaus: "You have to stand up there by yourself and face somebody who just about stole your soul."

The case number was called out to the court by Assistant State's Attorney Adam C. Rosenberg, who announced that a plea agreement had been reached. Hill would plead guilty to second-degree rape and agree to a 15-year prison sentence in return for prosecutors dropping more serious charges of first-degree rape and using a gun during the commission of a felony.

Laura was relieved. She had been prepared to get on the witness stand and recount for the court the most traumatic night of her life. But she hated for friends and family members in the courtroom to learn the details that way. Judge John M. Glynn accepted Hill's plea and sentenced him to 15 years, then asked if he wanted to say anything to the court. He did.

Hill began by saying he was on psychotropic drugs just to "keep me from crying." Then, in a slow, contrite voice, he apologized to Laura. "I've been facing guilt, trying to fight my own addiction. I'd just like to tell her I'm sorry for what I've done. I wish I was caught earlier in life so I wouldn't be so old going to jail. It's never too late to ask her to forgive me. I've been asking God to forgive me."

He stopped speaking, and there was an awkward moment of silence in the courtroom.

Judge Glynn asked Laura if she, too, wanted to say something.

She hadn't planned to speak, but something made her walk over to Alphonso Hill, hold onto the back of a chair that stood between them, and face him.

"I know it's been 19 years, but it's been 19 years of hell," Laura said, her voice quivering. "I've not slept alone in my home for 19 years. I've had roommates, begged people to stay with me. I live every single night in fear because of what you did. I don't want to continue to live in fear with anger and hatred. All I can say is thanks at least for saying sorry, because it's been really painful."

Again Hill said, "I'm sorry."

Laura nodded at him, turned her back and sat down.

In just 19 minutes, the court proceeding was over. Sheriff's deputies led Hill away in handcuffs and leg shackles.

Before taking up the next case on his long docket, Judge Glynn called the prosecutor to the bench. Rosenberg, who works in the sex crimes unit of the state's attorney's office, had been asked by Holthaus and Norton to take the case. Like the detectives, Rosenberg has a reputation for taking each case personally.

"Why did this take so long?" the judge asked him. "Why 19 years later did she call police?"

"She'd actually been calling, your honor," Rosenberg answered.

"Well, what changed?" Glynn asked.

"The first 10 years they didn't have the technology. The next five she'd call and they'd give her the runaround," Rosenberg said. "To be honest with you, those two big guys back there - Holthaus and Norton - they're the ones who made it happen. She just finally found the right guys. They finally believed her."

Laura Neuman's name was not released when her case was solved last April. Both the police and most news media outlets observe a policy of not identifying the victims of sexual assault. But Laura decided to come forward after the case was settled for a reason: She wanted to show that being a rape victim should not be a label of shame.

Seated in a leather chair in her three-level, Colonial-style home, Laura spoke about the angst, pain and, finally, the validation she received after nearly 20 years. She recalled, for instance, the disturbing realization that her case might have been solved a decade ago.

The technology that police used to identify Alphonso Hill has existed in Baltimore since 1992. Had detectives entered the fingerprints from Laura's file into the database earlier than they did, Hill's fingerprints would have come up, because he was arrested several times after 1992. Initially, though, the only unsolved cases the police used the database for were homicides.

"I think it's a travesty this took so long to solve," Laura said. "It's embarrassing for the entire criminal justice system. If this had been solved 10 years ago, my life would have changed 10 years ago, not now." Laura also spoke of Baltimore's startling unsolved rape statistic - police have evidence from more than 4,000 unsolved cases. In 2001, Baltimore recorded 296 rapes; on average, 132,000 rapes are reported nationwide every year. Nonetheless, it is the most underreported violent crime in America, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, with only about 39 percent of rape victims reporting their attacks to police.

Laura knows that, because her case was solved, she is in a small minority of rape victims. But she wants that to change, and is looking for a way to help others find the courage and resources to do what she did.

"They need to know that if they are proactive, something can be done about their cases, too," Laura said. "If you are your own advocate, you can affect your own outcome."

She knows how finding a resolution can change the victim's life.

"I felt like a different person the day he was arrested. I looked in the mirror and saw something new. It liberated me." For the first time, she told herself she wanted to start a family.

The night after Hill's arraignment last June, Laura met Paul Volkman, a 42-year-old bachelor, through friends. The couple has been seriously dating since.

Laura said she had worked hard to get to the point where she could be in a serious relationship. With Hill's arrest, she said her transformation was almost immediate.

"It was remarkable," says Fern Beu, the therapist. "I've never seen anything quite like it. She had an emotional epiphany. ... After a long time of not having people believe you, you question yourself. It undermines your sense of rightness in the world and righteousness in yourself."

Beu said the arrest "made the world right" for Laura.

One night recently, Laura came home at 11 p.m. and felt neither the anxiety nor the fear that had consumed her for years. She made sure the doors were locked, but she did not feel the need to check the house, look in every closet and every corner, as she had in the past. But there is still work to do. Laura's unfinished business now is with the man who raped her.

Alphonso Hill declined a reporter's request to interview him. But his letter from prison said he was glad to hear Laura was moving on with her life. "I opened my mouth and confessed to the crime and asked her and God for their forgiveness, and now for my own closure I'm keeping my mouth closed," he wrote.

One day, Laura hopes to visit Hill in jail, to see if he will talk to her about what happened in the wee hours of that morning 19 years ago. "I can't forgive him until I sit down and look at him eyeball to eyeball," Laura said. "Until I do that, I won't have enough closure about who this human being is, and why he did this to me."

She isn't certain when that meeting will occur. "I don't have a magic time. It could be tomorrow or 10 years from now." But she will wait as long as it takes.

Friends have offered to have a "burning party," a celebration in which Laura could at last destroy her pink hospital discharge sheet. But she is not ready for that yet; she may never be. The document has been with her since the beginning. Sometimes it served to confuse and frustrate her, but it was always a source of validation and hope - her proof when no one else believed.

"Now it's part of my history," Laura said. "It doesn't haunt me the way it did before." Faded, folded over three times, partially yellowed, that pink piece of paper sits in Laura Neuman's home, safely locked in a box, under a bed.

Copyright (c) 2003, The Baltimore Sun

